

## Cable Ready ... and Waiting

*Low-power station has issues with Time Warner*

**By P.F. Wilson**

A feud is an ugly thing. For the past few years a squabble between low-power broadcast WBQC-TV (channel 25) and the area's largest cable provider, Time Warner, has each side proclaiming the other's unwillingness to come to a reasonable agreement.

WBQC came on the air 10 years ago via a new concept by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Trying to stimulate over-the-air broadcast TV, the FCC created low-power TV, and made a number of licenses available. They were awarded through a lottery system. In Cincinnati video production company owner Elliott Block got the power ball.



**Elliott Block, WBQC-TV  
owner**

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The former digs for Block Video Productions in Golf Manor were converted and expanded. The transmitter is on WCPO-TV's tower, and WBQC runs a full slate of United Paramount Network (UPN) programs, assorted syndicated fare and a few local programs. The only liability seems to be WBQC's low-power status. WSTR-TV (channel 64) and WXIX-TV (channel 19) broadcast using 4-5 million watts. WBQC runs at just under 100,000. A crystal-clear picture is hard to get even as close as Anderson Township.

Of course, most folks have cable for this dilemma, but Time Warner has resisted carrying the channel. "We call it 'the war,' " explains Block. If you go to WBQC's Web site ([WBQC.com](http://WBQC.com)) you can send an e-mail to Time Warner. Several viewers have sent copies of Time Warner's responses to Block. "[Time Warner] speak with forked tongue, if you will," he says, as he lays copies out on a conference table.

In those responses, Time Warner's Larry Martin claims they are not required to carry WBQC, even though it is a Cincinnati station. This is actually true under FCC rules for low-power stations, but the resistance is questionable.

In one response Martin says Time Warner is talking to WBQC, but that the station will not pay cash for carriage rights. "We offer a signal to them free of charge, no strings attached," counters Block. "And they still can't make an agreement."

Time Warner's president, Virgil Reid, spoke to *CityBeat* by phone in a more diplomatic tone. He offered several reasons for WBQC's absence from his lineup. For instance, Time Warner has agreements with the other broadcasters in town.

"What are the agreements?" asks Block. "I'll make one." He adds that Time Warner wants "to lease me a channel for \$1.4 million."

Reid also claims the cable system's capacity is full. That may very well be true, and some folks may be upset if another channel were bumped.

The status of the future of WBQC's network, UPN, also factors into the decision. However, were UPN to go dark tomorrow, there would still be quite a bit of syndicated programming to take up the slack.

Block feels UPN's prospects are quite good. "UPN says 'We don't suck anymore. It's going to be the Para-mount Network this fall. It's going to be new and improved.'" Indeed, UPN this past season actually caught up to rival WB (WSTR carries the Warner Bros. network in Cincinnati) although largely because of pro wrestling and the *Star Trek* franchise.

Time Warner's Reid, though, simply questions the value of the programming, just as he does with *TV Land*, another often-requested but never-added channel. WBQC is apparently viewed by the cable system as a programming service, not a broadcast channel.

The case is perplexing. Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) is cable's biggest threat. More channels -- often at lower prices -- have led many viewers to pull the plug on cable. What has saved cable is the fact they bring you crystal-clear delivery of your local broadcast channels. This is important in a market like Cincinnati where transmitters are not clustered in one area of town, as they are in Cleveland or Knoxville. Of course, Time Warner subscribers aren't getting all their local channels. Even more ironic is the fact that cable started as a way for communities to get better reception of local broadcast channels.

DBS providers recently received the green light to offer local channels, but full implementation is not expected until at least 2002. Even then it's not a lock that all local broadcast channels will be offered. "The war" might have to open a new front. "We've spoken to them already," Block says with a slight smile.

The battle rages on with more and more viewers clamoring "Stop the war!" ©